

We Were Soldiers Once (And Young)

by RowenaR

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Summary: Collection of snippets centering around Thomas Lasky. Title borrowed from Harold G. Moore's account of his part in the Vietnam War by the same title. #7 It's a dirty job but someone has to do it. #8 It's stupid, but one of them has to be the first.

1. I Now For The Kill

A/N: For **yappichick** who thinks I totally need to read _all the Halo books_ and is totally _right_ :D I watched the miniseries because of something I read in writer **John Birmingham's blog** about Microsoft pumping a _lot_ of dollars into a six episode web series that was basically just meant as advertisement for the game. I was totally floored by how _good_ it was and I _needed_ to write fic for it, so thank you so much, **yappichick**, for making me :D

* * *

><p>In Now For The Kill

"_You're a prisoner of the dark sky
>The propeller blades are still
And the evil eye of the hurricane
is
>Coming in now for the kill."

_Mike Oldfield, "Five Miles Out"
>

"Soâ€| now what happens?"

Trust Sully to be the one asking the one question no wants an answer to. And now it's hanging in the stale air between them, all the way from the transport that got them back to Earth to the receiving area where they're released to their next of kin.

Just like that. Sure, there was some processing as could be expected

from the UNSC for the sole three survivors of the massacre on Circinius IV but almost too soon, they're inside a meeting room of some sorts and a guy in civilian clothes looking vaguely like an older version of Sully engulfing the actual Sully in a bear hug. He's pretty sure he just heard Sully gasp for air.

There's also a young woman, maybe the age Cadmon would be now, as dark as Orenski and he realizes that this must be her sister, the one everyone in Cadmon's class used to be terrified of. There's nothing terrifying about her now as she clasps Orenski's arm and hurls her into her arms, with something akin to a sob.

And there's Colonel Marianne Lasky. No hugs, no sobs, no declarations of motherly love, no surprise whatsoever there. He's pretty sure her only reaction to Cadmon's death was a shrug and a writing down her speech to him, taking care not to show anything related to grief or, Heaven forbid, love.

As for him now, there's an assessing glance, a once over of his clean, bruised face. He almost suspects that she can see through layers of uniform and wet suit, detecting all the raw and blistered skin the last cryosleep episode left him with. She nods.

"You have been debriefed, Thomas?" He forces himself to ignore the Sullivans and the Orenskis and all that overflowing joy at being reunited at last.

"Yes, sir." Another measuring gaze.

"I trust you had an extensive OPSEC briefing?" She means all of them and from the corner of his eyes, he can see Orenski gearing up to make the first grave mistake she properly ever made.

He decides to save her. "Yes, sir."

The Colonel nods again, signaling the Sullivans and Orenskis without even looking at them. "Report for conclusive combat readiness examination and new duty station assignment at 0800 tomorrow. You are dismissed."

There's a faint chorus of "yes, sir"s and he thinks he never hated the Colonel more than right now. Traumatized kids that were just reunited with loving relatives and all she tells them is that they're gonna be reassigned as soon as possible. Screw her.

"Thomas, you're going to stay here for the duration. I will accompany you to the quarters assigned to you and we will reevaluate your career options in the course of next week." Reevaluating his career options, his _ass_.

He almost makes the mistake of voicing that out loud but in a small miracle all that comes out of his mouth is another pathetic, "Yes, sir."

Not wasting any more time, the Colonel takes the lead. He follows, feeling oddly like he's twelve again and she just caught him making a fool of himself by parodying various UN officials in front of his friends. He can't believe he lets her make him feel like he needs to be punished instead of comforted, reassured, celebrated, dammit.

It's been a long war. Your mother's holding a lot of hands.

Just _once_, couldn't she hold _his_?

His eyes are burning holes in her ramrod straight back " he _wishes_ " as she stops shortly to talk to one of her subordinates. Mehaffey was one of them once, he can't help thinking, don't you grieve? If not for all the children, all the _people_ slaughtered, then at least for a _friend_?

It's festering, all that, deep inside of him. There's still a rational part in his head that knows what he's doing isn't healthy. It has Chyler's voice as she says, "Why are you still doing this to yourself?" and looks as impassionate as the Master Chief killing aliens. Something's really, really wrong with him.

The pictures of bodies too young to be dead in tattered black and white uniforms, lying next to each other appearing on the screens along the walls of the corridor really aren't helping at all.

Oh God, there's Iwamoto from Antonius Squad, half of his left arm missing and Marhsing from sophomore year, looking ten years younger without her perpetual frown and Dimah, oh God, oh God, Dimahâ€|

"Thomas?" There's Vickers, why is there Vickers? "Cadet Lasky!" Shit.

"I apologize, sir." The Colonel throws him a look that tells him she suspects there's something wrong with him as well and that doesn't have anything to do with the blisters on his back.

"Apology accepted, Cadet." Huh. She doesn't look convinced but that doesn't stop her from starting to march again and he hastens to follow her.

Corridor after corridor and in the rhythm of their steps, he finds temporary solace. Taking care to stay in step with her gives him a welcome distraction from all the destruction on Circinius IV. There's no conversation, either and he's grateful for that. It absolves him of thinking even further. It rescues him from the relentless "Soâ€| now what happens?" bouncing around his head, from aliens to robot super soldiers, from children's bodies to blisters on his backâ€|

"Your new quarters, Thomas." He blinks. How embarrassing that he nearly ran into her from behind. How fortunate that he's just too damn tired to have any energy left to be able to make any other face than impassive.

"Thank you, sir." She nods, keyes in a sequence that he just can't bother to remember now and the door opens. Not a glass door, like back at the Academy and he already knows that he'll feel as he were lying in a coffin as soon as it closes behind him. It's painfully appropriate.

He steps inside, determined to make the best of it. At least he doesn't have to share the room with anyone else. "Thomas?" _What_, he wants to ask and whirl around to stare her down but all he does is

throw a look over his shoulder, so he doesn't have to look her directly in the face as she says, "Welcomeâ€| home."

Home. Home is somewhere entirely else.

There's a moment where he wants to tell her that, wants to tell her home was were Cadman was or his friends or _Chyler_ but he justâ€| doesn't have the strength anymore. So he just nods and the door closes behind him, leaving him in the dark. He doesn't bother with a command for light, simply stumbles to the bed.

He all but collapses, combat boots and all and he turns on his back, seeing _FORWARD UNTO DAWN_ etched into the ceiling over his head where there is just black, smooth nothingness. He hears a knock on the wall next to him, twice and when he realizes that is was his hand that knocked and that there's only silence as an answer, he turns on his side, curls up and surrenders to the tidal wave inside of him.

She's gone, they're all gone and there's just black nothingness and blinding whiteness, all rolled into one and making him suffer, suffer and sob and scream his heart out and whimper when it's all too much and the sobs just won't stop.

And round and round and round the question goes in his head.

Soâ€| now what happens?

It's always there, all through the painful journey through his own grief and misery and fear and trauma. Going round and round and round.

Soâ€| now what happens?

It accompanies him, through the night and the sobbing _just won't stop_ and it's just always there. Going round and round and round.

Soâ€| now what happens?

It takes him half an eternity to get enough space between sobs to be able to _breathe_ and when he does for the first time, ragged and with _physical_ pain that has nothing to do with the allergy, he makes a decision. And then it all starts again.

Soâ€| now what happens?

Now, he thinks as he's being wrecked by sobs in the dark, I'm going to make Chyler Silva proud. I'm going to make all of Corbulo Academy of Military Science proud.

And what else is there to think when you're lying on a strange bed, in strange quarters, the only familiar things your pain eating you up from the inside and the dog tags clutched in your hand? What else is there left for you?

2. Down Upon My Knees

A/N: **Because **yappichick made me watch Spartan Ops on YouTube

(though technically, this takes place shortly before Spartan Ops and alludes to Karen Traviss's The Thursday War a couple times). Also, because HALO somehow, someway turned into a research subject for me this semester and I'm still trying to work out how that happened (I strongly suspect it to be **yappichick**'s fault, too) and I just can't leave it alone. It also mutated into a series (just can't wait for Spartan Ops ep 10. Whatever happens, the Lasky and Palmer in my head are already running amok). How did that happen?

PS.: Damn, I need a Palmer/Lasky icon, badly.

* * *

><p>Down Upon My Knees (And You Have Broken Me)

"You have broken me all the way down
>Down upon my knees
And you have broken me all the way down

>You'll be the last, you'll see."

Glen Hansard, "All the Way Down"

He made Captain today. Thirty-one years after they told him he'd never have a future in the UNSC, to the day. The irony certainly isn't lost on him. It's kind of poetic, even, considering he made Captain because Del Rio couldn't, as Parangosky would have said, "politic" his way out of the mess he brought him in by letting the Master Chief escape on Requiem against Del Rio's orders. That and that the old dragon seemed to have had a soft spot for misfits like him. It wouldn't surprise him if she found a way to appoint people to her likening even from beyond the grave.

He made Captain today and all he can think of is the set of dog tags in his hands. He wonders what she'd have said to that.

Probably that thirty-one years is a long time to grieve for someone. Or that he's not really still grieving for Chyler or even the rest of his friends that died on Circinius IV. Maybe she'd tell him that what he's really still grieving for is his childhood or his innocence.

Or maybe she'd tell him to stop with the bullshit and raise one to her and one to Circinius IV on the party in his new ready room. Yeah, he thinks and can't help twisting his mouth into a humorless half grin, that sounds more like the old dragon.

That doesn't change the fact, though, that he's still sitting on his bunk with a set of dog tags in his hands that should have long gone to Chyler's next of kin and that he just couldn't let go. He'd had to let lots of things, lots of people go through all those years and sometimes he held on to those dog tags as if they were a life line.

When they told him he wouldn't be serving in this new war for at least two more years, if he would be serving at all, he'd gripped the dog tags hard enough that they left dark red smudges on his palm, digging into them painfully. The attack on CAMS had left something in him, or maybe awakened it, something raw and primal that had been hard to tame for a 14 year old. After crying his heart out, he'd

wanted to do only one thing. Fight.

They let him, three years later, or at least they started training him again, this time conditioning him to shoot aliens, not humans. Sometimes, he was ashamed of the hatred he found in himself when they were training them on how to shoot Covenant aliens, firing around like blind men trying to hit a cat. He felt like he was starting to lose himself.

He lost his mother about four years after he started training again. The great Colonel Lasky, having been promoted to General posthumously, having died from a heart attack. Not even in the field, and he had a pretty hard time not breaking out laughing in the middle of a briefing for his class's last Tuesday War before graduating naval officer training. There went another part of him.

Orenski bought it later that same year, feet first into the battle, Helljumper, Helljumper, where have you been and all that crap. When her dog tags were in the first package he received on his first posting as a newly minted Ensign and he opened it, he didn't even realize for a full five minutes that he was crying again. Just wetness on his cheeks when reading her sister's letter saying that she felt April's dog tags were better off with him, seeing as she would be shipping out for another tour as a Helljumper herself in three days. He never heard from Orenski's sister, either but at least he got to keep that part of himself, after all.

Sully crashed with the Pelican he'd been piloting â€“ strange, he'd though back then, for some reason, military intelligence had always seemed what Sully would excel at to him â€“ two years later. Sully didn't die but sometimes it felt like he was dead, anyway. Paralyzed from the waist down, rejecting every offer at having his bodily functions restored and washing out of the Marines. He'd needed three years to find him again, track him through ten colonies having been glassed before he found him in a seedy bar at the end of the known universe, or so it felt.

They still meet sometimes for a beer or two and they call it "Reunion of the Class of 2529 of Corbulo Academy of Military Science". Or, for short, "The Last". Hard to believe that there are no more survivors of the massacre that started his own personal war against the Covenant. Actually, there aren't a lot of people who once attended to CAMS anymore, period. Meeting Sully helps him keeping that part of him alive.

And somewhere along the line, Admiral Parangosky happened, someone who believed in him, even when he didn't believe in himself anymore and had no Chyler Silva, no Colonel Mehaffy who kept reassuring him that somewhere inside of him was a soldier anymore. Men cowered at the mere mentioning of her name â€“ most of the time he did, too, he doesn't have any illusions about that â€“ and there she was, nodding at a Lieutenant who'd been refused a promotion to Lieutenant Commander six years in a row and voiced aloud how she appreciated perseverance and standing up for what you believed in at some function or other.

No one had believed her about that second part, and he hadn't either but six months later his then Captain had to pin Lieutenant Commander's oak leaves to his shoulders, whether she wanted to or not. There had been packet of cookies in his quarters when he came

back after the ceremony. No note attached, not even a bow or gift wrapping. Just the cookies he'd seen Parangosky being especially partial to at said function. That had been kind of endearing. Really, really creepy but endearing. Chyler would have laughed her ass off at that, after being sufficiently jealous of him for receiving so much attention.

There'd been other things like that over the years, small interventions every time it looked like they might throw him out after all, despite needing all the manpower they could get. He'd started wondering what the old dragon would want as her price for furthering his career like that pretty soon because ONI never did someone a favor without expecting you to pay your dues at some point. He thinks, after remembering her inspection of Infinity before sending them off to Sanghelios, that maybe this captaincy is the price ONI is asking of him to pay, after all those years.

He shakes his head and leans his forehead against his fists still clutching Chyler's dog tags. So many, many years, so many lossesâ€| was it worth it, he keeps asking himself. He'd always come up short an answer, if it weren't for one Lieutenantâ€| Commander Sarah Palmer telling him he was overthinking it again and that he needed a break and look at how many people they didn't lose because there were people like him and her keeping up the fight.

His mouth twists into another grin, one that isn't fully devoid of humor this time.

Sarahâ€| well. He thinks Parangosky would have liked Palmer, had she paid attention to her enough before she died four years ago. Chyler would have liked her as well, though maybe they wouldn't have gone on well with each other. His motherâ€| she would have hated Palmer. They'd have been like two frag grenades set to detonate every time they'd have been in the same room. It would have been a magnificent display of strong wills and superior fighting skills, if nothing else. He'd actually have paid money to see that.

As it was, he got to know Sarah eight years ago, as a Second Lieutenant in the Marines, just out of OCS, as the commander of the detachment of Marines on board the corvette he'd been serving on at the time. Fittingly enough, their first meeting had been a simple misunderstanding about quarter assignment on board that had deteriorated quickly into a shouting match of epic proportions.

He still has no idea what it was that made him lose composure like that. Sarah actually had had the gall to insinuate issues with strong female figures because of some past trauma involving one of them. The only reason they're friends to today is probably that he's ten years her senior and had the experience and good grace to say yes to the beer she'd offered to buy him a day later, anyway.

Some days, he thinks that maybe their friendship works despite the age difference, different attitudes, different tempers because they know how to make sure that they both don't lose more parts of themselves than they already did.

There'd been fights again, because that's just what happens between Navy and Marines and has probably been happening for almost a thousand years now already but there'd only been one other that was as bad as their first one. No shouting match this time, just months

of silence from both sides because Sarah had volunteered to be one of the first SPARTAN-IVs and he'd had different ideas about what "career advancement" meant.

The stories they were telling about SPARTAN-IIIs and IIIIs and their origins with voices lowered and throwing furtive glances in all directions before starting to whisper just were a bit too much when you imagined only half of those things being done to your best friend — some would say only friend in his case — however much consensual or not.

And still, even with Sarah having survived augmentation and being still alive he misses— "I honestly thought they were bullshitting me but it seems you really are missing your own promotion party, Captain Lasky."

Shit. He should never have given her the access codes to his quarters, no matter how much he trusts her. And anyway, "Do you ever knock, Commander Palmer?"

She gives him a mock offended look, complete with raised eyebrows and drawing her head back a little. "I did knock, Tom. When you didn't open—" "

"You automatically assumed something was wrong? I'm deeply touched by your concern." He actually is, despite the deadpan and dry sarcasm. He would just never tell her so. Some things, they don't talk about in this friendship.

Her answer is a look that suggests this might not be one of his brighter or saner days and jerking her head in the direction of the corridor behind her. "Come one. If we don't make it there soon, they'll assume we wanted a more private celebration and eat all the damn cake."

Private celebration, his ass. Half the crew probably already think she's sleeping with him, so he's pretty sure she doesn't care, either about what the other half might be thinking after today. "Never knew you were so much of a cake person, Sarah."

"As it happens, I'm very partial to cake. Now please get up your fucking ass and make an appearance at the damn party." Only Sarah Palmer can make a sentence with the word please in it sound like an order to shoot at that fucking target now, we really haven't got all day, Cadet..

She's right, of course. He needs to be there, even if it's just for an hour or so because lots of people will be there. The committee that dethroned Del Rio will be there, and a couple other brass. Including Admiral Osman. Yeah, well. Even a Captain by the grace of Margaret Parangosky can't afford to snub someone like Serin Osman. He sighs and gets up, slipping Chyler's dog tags into his pocket. "I can leave after an hour, right?"

It makes Sarah laugh, just outright laugh, like she would only do with him, never in anyone else's company and say, "Course, sir. Just I have it on good authority that Master Chief might make an appearance later today."

He doesn't believe her for one second because he knows full well that

the Master Chief they're talking about here is still too wrapped up in his grief over the loss of his AI two weeks ago to even consider attending something so probably alien to him as a promotion party full of brass. He lost people he still isn't done grieving for over thirty years ago.

Still, he decides to humor Sarah, "Really now? And what's "good authority" supposed to mean?"

"Oh didn't you know? The gossip's strong in the SPARTAN community!" He lets her talk, laughs and interjects in the right moments, all the way to his new ready room. It does him good to be with her, be around her, listen to her, talk to her, no matter what they're saying about them on the ship and in the brass. She keeps him grounded, keeps him walking, talking, fighting. Sometimes he likes to think he's doing the same for her.

And he never told her about Circinus IV or his mother or Orenski or Sully or Chyler. He isn't going to start now.

Maybe tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Or maybe never. It doesn't matter now. It's his promotion to Captain today, thirty-five years after the day they told him he'd never have a future in the UNSC and Sarah's here to celebrate it with him. What better way to forget that the world as he knew it died on that same day thirty-one years ago than that?

3. Foolishness and Self-Deception

A/N: You see this, 343industries? This is what your Spartan Ops S1 epilogue made me write! I hope you're happy now :P

SPOILERS FOR EPILOGUE (obviously...)

(but seriously, that epilogue killed me. That little conversation between Palmer and Lasky and Catherine Halsey and Jul 'Mdama and just everything. That just can't end well, even though I think Halsey's up to something other than the revenge she told 'Mdama about. How long will we have to wait for S2?)

Also, I recently read a tumblr post speculating on how Palmer might have been placed on Infinity by Osman like Lasky was probably placed there by Parangosky and since I instantly thought "This makes a fucking truck load of sense, y'all." it might have actually influenced this fic. I'm half done with a follow up fic to this (also, a prequel because I kept wondering how Lasky and Palmer made up after the "months of silence" after Palmer's decision to become a SPARTAN-IV I wrote about it Down Upon My Knees and instantaneously had an idea...) and there might be further influence in it, as well. Those two are just killing me, guys... *shakes head

PS.: I'm so glad you people like this little series! Thanks for your reviews and favorites! They mean a lot to me :)

* * *

><p>Foolishness and Self-Deception

â€ž_Bitte, bitte, bitte, bitte, bitte

>nicht alles auf einmal.
Ich verliere meine Mitte
>und das hatten wir schon mal.

Ein Leben im Ärgerflug,
>mit Leichtsinn und Selbstbetrug.
>Nie genug, nie genug."

Selig, â€žAlles auf einmal"

He's screwed three ways from Sunday. Or maybe _they_ 're screwed three ways from Sunday. Sarah and he. Him and Sarah. Royally screwed ever since he sent down Majestic to stop her from assassinating Dr. Halsey.

No, that's bullshit. They were screwed the moment Admiral Osman issued the order to assassinate Catherine Halsey, for reasons he still doesn't want to think about. For a moment, just a tiny one, he'd considered asking Roland to split a fragment of himself off and go crawling in the ONI archives to find a reason, just any reason that might justify or at least explain the clearly wrong order Osman had given him. But he does value Infinity's AI too much to sacrifice him to the ONI's counterintelligence software.

Which leaves him with a seriously pissed off Sarah Palmer and possibly a seriously, seriously pissed off Admiral Osman. Of the latter he doesn't know for sure since she hasn't deemed it important enough to contact them since they lost Halsey a week ago yet. Or maybe she's just so pissed off that talking to him might result in his immediate court-martial and execution by firing squad or something.

Of the formerâ€¦ yeah, he knows for sure she's pissed off. The way she treated him when Glassman asked them to have a look at the artifact Halsey had thrown Thorne just before Sarah hit her spoke volumes. That and the fact that she's been giving him the silent treatment for almost a week now.

In a way, he even understands. She probably feels betrayed by him, for sending a fireteam of her SPARTANS after her and keeping her from executing an order she took over for him. He'd probably felt betrayed, too, that's not the point. The point is that she's practically his second in command on this boat, even with Phillips actually being his XO and that the two leading officers onboard this ship just can't afford a tiff like that.

Which is why he asked her to his ready room, just like he'd ask any other crew member for a private discussion of any issues having arisen. She'll hate him for the formality.

There's a knock on his door and for some reason he wouldn't even have needed Roland to announce to him that it's Sarah. Something in that knock just told him how pissed off she is about having been summoned like she were a junior officer who's too green behind her ears to tell right from left and needs someone to set her right. He nods at Roland. "Let her in. And try not to eavesdrop until we're done, will you?"

Roland snaps him a smart salute, saying, "Yes, sir. No eavesdropping, sir." still sounding like he secretly thinks he's going to be terminated before his time, probably still for that thing with Halsey

and the override code. Good God, he's not going to have to have a talk with his AI as well, is he?

Wellâ€| "Reporting as ordered, sir." There goes his calm and collected approach. Sarah's always full of tension but it's really rare that she's like that with him, all steel cord ready to snap and everything.

"Sarahâ€|" She deviates from her staring straight ahead tactic, just a moment, and her expression is full of barely veiled "don't fuck with me". It lets his heart rate spike because damn, that might work with her SPARTANS and he isn't one of those. He's her fucking commanding officer. "Commander Palmerâ€| please have a seat."

"I'd prefer to remain standing, sir." She's obviously determined to make this as hard as possible for him.

Fine. Two can play that game. "And I'd prefer if you sat down. So sit the fuck down, Commander."

It's not that he doesn't use profanity. It's just that it's usually less pronouncedâ€| and less directed at her. At least it seems to have the desired effect, seeing as she just sat down, her back ramrod straight, her gaze still straight ahead, kind of looking through him. He resists the temptation to sigh and roll his eyes. "Soâ€| I take it you know what this is about?"

Well, at least she stopped that thousand yard stare crap and is now looking directly at him, after all. "I don't know, sir. Why don't you enlighten me?"

Not as hard as possible for him, then. Rather hard enough to make him want to punch her. They both know he wouldn't even get as far as getting up from his chair, so he tries to treat this as an exercise in patience and benevolence, instead. "Look, Sarahâ€|"

"I know what this is about alright." Then why were you trying to mess with me, he wants to answer but she finally seems to have decided to drop the silent treatment. "This is about you still thinking I'm overreacting to you basically betraying me and undermining my authority with a fireteam under my command. And all that for someone like Catherine Halsey."

He doesn't really get it. Okay, yes, he gets the betrayal part because that's how he would feel, too. What he doesn't get is why she still thinks that order was justified and why she seems to unwilling, maybe even unable to realize that they're still not the ONI's willing henchmen. But making a concession never hurt anyone, either. "Look, I get that you're upset about me commandeering Majesticâ€|"

"I am not upset, Tom, I'm disappointed and pissed off because I don't get why you would want to defend someone like that bitch." She got it all wrong. So, so wrong.

Knowing how futile it probably is, he tries to reason with her anyway. "I wasn't defending her. Iâ€|"

"You were keeping me from neutralizing her, yes." Neutralizing. He never thought Sarah of all people would be given to ONI euphemisms. "I was about to do the fucking universe a favor, Tom."

He can't believe what's going on here. This isn't Sarah. It's someone looking like her, using her voice to sound like an ONI agent. As much respect as he had for Admiral Parangosky he always knew he could never like someone who worked for ONI, let alone be friends with someone like that. He shakes his head, starting to become a tad desperate. "What's happening here, Sarah? You're a soldier, not an assassin."

There's this tiny moment when it looks as if she knows that full well herself, as if she knows exactly why this is so out of character for her and has a hard time not feeling ashamed for it. And then it's being replaced by her SPARTAN commander game face, all hard eyes and sharp edges. "They were my orders, Tom." Notâ€| "Noâ€| no, they were your orders."

Ah, not that again. Yes, they were his orders and yes, she volunteered â€" more like snatched them up from under his hands, no buts allowed, really â€" but he so, so wished she hadn't. He had it all under control, really. "And I was prepared to goâ€|"

"No, Tom, no you weren't!" How dare sheâ€| "You weren't prepared to go against Serin fucking Osman's orders." Why yes, he was, and why does she seem so desperate all of a sudden, desperate enough that she just jumped up. "You just think you were but you have no idea of the enemy you would have made and what she could have done to you. Youâ€|"

Something in this rubs him wrong. Maybe it's that she sounds awfully much like she knows what she's talking about when telling him about not knowing what kind of enemy Serin Osman is. He shakes his head again, half rising out of his seat. "What is going on here, Sarah? What is this really about?"

For a moment, it looks as if she's going to tell him why she's so agitated that it looks almost as if she's deathly afraid of Osman but then she shakes her hand and says quietly, "Catherine Halsey is a war criminal, Tom."

Suddenlyâ€| it's all too much. It's like something in him bursts up, something that is really, really fed up with being fed the same crap over and over again from her even though he just knows that she knows that it was a wrong order and that there's something completely else behind her obvious zeal to shoot Catherine Halsey. He explodes. "And do you remember what we do with criminals? Do you? No?"

He's up on his feet now as well, walking around his desk with brisk strides, nearly forgetting that even though he wants to go face to face with her, she's still almost a full head taller than he is. Well fuck that. "So let me enlighten you. We don't assassinate them. We put them on fucking trial!"

She wants to speak up again but a sudden realization strikes him. There'd been a reason that order unsettled him like that. Okay, despite the very obvious ethical implications. He takes a deep breath, trying to sound reasonable again. "Sarahâ€| haven't you wondered why CINCONI would order a battleship captain to have a prisoner disposed of instead of simply activating one of the probably dozen ONI operatives on this ship? Why would she do that?"

All she does is shaking her head and staring at him defiantly.
"Orders, Tom. They were just _fucking orders_."

Jesus fucking Christ, if she says that just one more time he's gonna have her checked for some kind of brainwashing. That really doesn't sound like the woman who'd refused to touch Cortana's chip at point blank when ordered to by Del Rio. "As if _orders_ were ever your strength, Sarah!"

She presses her lips together briefly before saying, "They are when it's Serin Osman giving them," in a quiet and controlled tone that would give him the creeps if he weren't too far gone already.

As it is, it's just one thing that really registers in his head. Something inside of him just went ice-cold. "Holy shit, Sarah, please tell me you aren't one of herâ€|"

"I'm _not_ ONI." The first thing he thinks is that it was too fast to be honest but then he registers the absolute conviction in it and the slight hint of disgust at him even thinking about the possibility that she might be a spook. He will never be able how exactly he knows that but something deep down in his guts tells her she'd rather be dead than an ONI operative. The feeling is so comforting that it does trouble him a bit.

"But I know when not to question a fucking order." That wasn't so much better than her admitting to be an ONI agent, actually.

Reallyâ€|" Seriously, Tom, you are so by the book usually with all that Corbulo "Axios!" crap bred into you and that inability to disregard an orderâ€|"

"Don't." Not today. Not ever. If she knows what's good for her, for them she'll shut up right fucking now.

She has no idea what's good for them. "I just bet that you were a model cadet that couldn't do a wrong step even if heâ€|"

Something inside of him just fucking hurts when she says that. Something that lay dormant for many, many years, something that never really went away. He takes a deep breath and it's nearly as painful as right after an episode of cryosleep. "Sarahâ€|"

"Regular little tin soldier with his little rifle and his little armorâ€|"

It just fucking hurts so fucking bad to hear her say that, say that like that with sarcasm dripping from it, right onto the fucking floor and settling there in a puddle, in a stain. "Out."

"What, struck a nerve, have I?" Yes, godammit, deeper and harder than any friend of his should ever do and suddenly, he doesn't even care about the things that might have driven her to never question orders from Serin Osman. "Where's all that gone now that it is about that oldâ€|"

As if this is still about Halsey. "I said out, Commander."

She stops in her ranting, like she just ran against a wall that she couldn't break through, even with her armor aiding her. She narrows

her eyes, stares at him and the look of disappointment and betrayal in them stings more than it should. "Fuck you, Captain."

Doesn't she see it? He's doing this to protect them both from each other. Or maybe he would, if he were still thinking straight. Right now, he's mostly protecting himself. "Get the fuck out of my room. Now."

There's no answer from her now, except marching past him, all pent up rage and frustration â€“ as if it wasn't she who just ripped open wounds that never really healed and not the other way around â€“ and only seconds after the door closes behind her, he hears a heavy thunk, like something heavy just hit a bulkhead. Yeah. Better that than him.

Oh God, as if she would everâ€¦ "Maybe you should tell her about Circinius IVâ€¦"

No, not Roland, too. "Stop snooping around my personnel records, Roland. And didn't I tell you not to listenâ€¦"

"â€¦otherwise she will probably have demolished half the ship in three days." Apparently, Roland still hasn't really forgiven her for making a considerable dent in one of the terminals on the bridge a little over a week ago.

He sits down at his desk again, suddenly so very, very tired. "She's a professional."

"She's Sarah Palmer." Which doesn't mean she would keep rampaging through the ship just because she sometimes reacts pretty violently to things that anger her. Even though being really, really pissed off with her for using Circinius IV as a fucking weapon against him, he still knows Roland is being unreasonable here.

Leaning with his forehead against his fist, he shakes his head. "Stop trying to have the final say in this."

"I will. As soon as you take my advice." Is everyone on this ship set to piss him off today? The only thing lacking is either Osman finally making an inquiry in how far they are with finding Jul 'Mdama and Dr. Halsey or Halsey and 'Mdama appearing out of nowhere with a couple Prometheans in tow to finish what they started over Requiem. Or, as luck would have it, both of the above mentioned at the same time.

Quiet. He needs quiet. Just for a few minutes, maybe an hour. Just quiet and maybe catching up on sleep lost over last week. Without looking at Roland, he drags out, "Leave me alone for a few, will you?"

"Captainâ€¦" And now Roland's being all worried and trying to mother hen him.

He sighs. "Roland."

Half expecting another attempt at being insistent on making him talk about Corbulo with Sarah, he's actually surprised to see Roland snapping a salute a little less sharp than usual when he looks and saying, "Yes, sir," before vanishing in a little cloud of

particles.

He's all alone now and the quiet he kept nearly praying for in the last few minutes is still eluding him. He groans, his head in his hands and starting to throb. Ah hell. Maybe he should just go back to working through the paperwork backlog that accumulated during the days in Requiem's orbit. That should at least keep him occupied long enough to work out where to go from here. And what else can you do when you have a ship to run even when your brain can't decide on which trauma to settle to keep you busy with today, anyway?

"Please, please, please, please, please

Not everything at once.

I'm losing my center

And that happened before.

A life of high-flight,

With foolishness and self-deception

Never enough, never enough."

Selig, "Everything at Once"

4. People Spend a Lifetime This Way

**A/N: **I should stop with the overly long titles, shouldn't I? Also, until further notice last part of We Were Soldiers Once (except, maybe, that prequel I still keep mulling over in my head). Next part probably depends on when we'll get the next season of Spartan Ops. Unless I encounter cute little bunnies (with their little rifles pointed at me) that make it impossible to say no to them (because they're pointing those rifles at me), that is.

Also, Palmer totally surprised me in this fic and believe me when I tell you that I did not see that one coming but she insists on it and I feel myself unable to say no to her (she's the one who supplies the bunnies with their lethal hardware). I hope you like that little twist :S

Also, also: thanks so much for all the favorites and reviews, y'all! I'm so glad that there are people liking this little series and I never thought it would draw such an interest. Thank you so much!

* * *

><p>People Spend A Lifetime This Way (And That's How They Stay)

"What a shame we never listened

>I told you through the television
And all that went away was the price we paid

>People spend a lifetime this way
And that's how they stay."_

Robbie Williams feat. Gary Barlow, "Shame"

One of the very few perks of being a commanding officer on board a war ship as big as Infinity is that you have your own shower and you even get it en suite. Not that the suite is very big but it's got a bunk fitted to her height and is reinforced to carry her augmented body's weight, a terminal with access to nearly all data on the ship, except a very few but including some ONI data (she'd never tell Tom because he'd draw all the wrong conclusions), and enough space for push-ups and sit-ups and a SPARTAN really doesn't need more than that to be a regulation amount of happy.

Thank God those of her fellow Marines who are still alive and still occasionally find themselves sleeping in a sandbagged ditch under a sodden tarpaulin don't know about this or she'd never hear the end of it.

Anywayâ€| she's got her shower built into her quarters which means that she doesn't get stared at by everyone and their mother out of her bodysuit even more than when wearing the thing. And it means that there's at least one occasion less she could run into Tom.

Which, basically is all she can think about, ever since he threw her out of his ready room three days ago. It was her own damn fault and she knew that, the moment she left his room. There's a dent several centimeters wide and deep opposite his ready room's door testament to that. But he'd kept digging into the hole that Osman had drilled into her head during augmentation, the one that had taught her absolute loyalty to the UNSC, the ONI and CINCONI, most of all. And she just hadn't known how to keep him out of that hole any other way than throwing whatever she could think of right back into his face.

And that had been so, so stupid.

Of course she knows nothing about Circinius IV. The records are still classified and not on the list of those she has access to, just like Tom's personnel record. She heard whispers about it but mostly the bits and pieces everyone gets taught in history classes, anyway. It was home to a bunch of kids of UNSC personnel trying to become soldiers at the age of fourteen and upwards, until it wasn't anymore.

She knows Tom went there because he once told her so, without elaborating when and with whom, and she really did always assume he'd been as quiet, diligent and decent as a cadet as he's now as an officer, occasional outbursts of subversion notwithstanding. She knows who let the Chief go back on Requiem. His reaction to her tauntsâ€| whoa. She's pretty sure she never saw him that pissed off ever before and he hadn't even been yelling when he threw her out.

Every time she thinks about it, she starts to become so tired, despite knowing that SPARTANS don't get tired and don't even need much sleep in general. But it's happening again and she sits down on her bunk, completely naked. Sometimes, she likes to feel nothing but her skin and really, she'll put on the body suit again in a minute.

Groaning, she covers her face with her hands, hoping Roland isn't

listening in again. He's been kind of anxious about this rift between her and Tom lately, trying to push her in Tom's direction to "kiss and make up" â€“ he actually used that phrase, albeit only once because she threatened him with demolishing another terminal if he kept that up â€“ and generally being a pain in the ass.

He even ran an emergency drill yesterday, complete with four hours of cryosleep for every personnel, including her and Tom to see "if I can still fly this girl solo". Fly this girl solo, her ass. That had been a none too subtle hint to man up and apologize to Tom for the hell of it. It's just that sheâ€œ!

A knock.

A fucking knock on her cabin door. Whoever that was better has a really good excuse because they'll see a half-naked SPARTAN in a second and God help them if they don't know where to keep their eyes, she thinks as she winds a towel around her body, thank God long enough to cover everything essential. She is so going to killâ€œ!

Tom?

So. In eight years they managed to get around seeing more skin of the other than what isn't covered by their respective branches standard uniform â€“ and PT gear, before she became augmented â€“ and suddenly, he's wearing a long-sleeved black shirt and track pants and she is wearingâ€œ! Well. "You better come in before anyone sees us and I have to shoot them before they open their mouth again."

He doesn't answer at first, just nods a little resignedly and walks in, looking a little forlorn for a moment, then deciding to settle on her bed after a short look of gaining permission from her. She nods, considering to sit down next to him before remembering that it's part of her combat readiness to keep her body suit on at any given moment. Also, being half-naked in Tom's presence possibly just blew up her own personal scale of awkwardness. She clears her throat. "I just need toâ€œ! I'll be back in a minute."

The way he looks up at her makes her think he'd not been in her cabin a moment ago. He'd been somewhere pretty far away. She just nods again, trying to uphold at least a minimum of both their dignity. Then she turns around, grabs her body suit and makes her way to her tiny shower stall, wondering how the hell she'll get the thing on in there.

And yeah, only five minutes later, she knows she'll never get the damn thing fastened in here. Too fucking small to reach behind her and get the fastenings on her back done. And this is why she usually does this in the mainâ€œ! "Come here, I'll help you."

Huh? "Do you evenâ€œ!"

"Just get your ass out of there and let me help you." Damn. Whenever he sounds like that â€“ slightly irritated, and he probably rolled his eyes, too â€“ it's better you do what he says because you don't want him to become more than slightly irritated. With a roll of her eyes of her own, she gets out of the shower and turns her back to him. Immediately, she starts to feel him tugging and pressing at her back, and once or twice his fingers fleetingly touch the bare skin

between her shoulder blades. It's a good thing for both of them that their friendship isn't a physical one.

"So," he says in between tugging in the pre-last of the fastenings, "her name was Chyler Silva, and she was a model cadet who couldn't do a wrong step even if tried."

Ah, so this really is what it's about. She turns around, not caring that he isn't quite done yet. "Tom, I never meant toâ€|"

"Wait, wait, wait," he just says and gently turns her back so he can finish his work. "Bear with me. I'm only doing what I should have done years ago."

He's done now and she turns around, facing him and making a point of looking him straight in the eye when she says, "No, you don't have to. I'm sorry that I everâ€|"

A little exasperation shows in his face. As if he had a plan of about every second of how this was supposed to go. If she didn't know better, she'd actually call this cute. "Damn, Sarah, would you please let me finish this?"

She shrugs and gestures back to her bunk. "Okay, fine, have it your way."

He gives her a raised eyebrow, like he always does when he knows she's bullshitting him and doesn't exactly approve of it but sits down on her bunk eventually. "Thank you." She decides that it's really fairer to the both of them that she sits down on the bunk as well, seeing as he usually has to crane up his neck to look at her, already.

She sits down next to him, maybe ten centimeters space between their shoulders. She tries not to read too much in the way he hesitates before leaning his back against the wall next to her. "I was a cadet at Corbulo." Yes, well, she knew that. "My brother went there before me and I didn't have a say in it, either." Okay, she didn't know that. Actually, she didn't even know he has a brother? Or had? "What Colonel Lasky wanted, Colonel Lasky got. And she wanted both her sons to be soldiers." Ah, soâ€| his mother, then.

She frowns. "What about your father?"

There's a shrug, or maybe it was a wince from him. "Didn't have one. That is, I did but I never got to know him. She wouldn't tell us what happened to him and we didn't ask." Must have been some kind of family life, then. "Anywayâ€| I was a freshman, member of Hastati Squad. You'd have hated me."

She can't help but snort. No way. "No, I wouldn't."

"Oh yes, you would." She's not sure if she really likes that self-deprecating grin. There's just too much sadness mixed in it. "If there ever was an underperforming cadet, it was me. Really bad at cooperating with my squad mates, always doubting the team leader's orders, making a fool out of myself with useless solosâ€|"

"Okay, revise everything I just said. I would have hated you. Big time." Or at least she would have hated the cadet that Tom just

described. For some reason, she just can't conceal the image of the squad troublemaker and underperformer with _Infinity_ 's captain and her best friend.

At least she made him smile with her admission. She missed that. The realization of that hurts in strange ways. "They called me an innie lover, because I had the gall to voice my doubts over fighting a coupleâ€| what did I say? Ah yeah, "overtaxed farmers"." Colonial insurrection. Yeah, at forty-five he'd be old enough to remember, as opposed to her who'd only been four when the Covenant War had started. To think that there'd once been a time where humans shot at humans on a regular scaleâ€| "Actually, sometimes it felt as if there was exactly _one_ cadet who didn't hate me."

Well, that's an easy one, actually. At least easy enough for an educated guess. "Chyler Silva."

There's honest surprise in his face when she says that and his reaction is another little smile. "You got an amazing head on your shoulders, Commander." If this had been just _anyone_ else than Thomas Lasky, she'd have thought he was just _flirting_ with her. Thank God he doesn't wait for her to comment. "Chyler was the only one who always put up with me, even when I was probably insulting her parents on a daily scale. They both died in combat against the overtaxed farmers."

She considers that. Wonders what made Silva stand by him, even when he probably didn't share her beliefs. She finds it remarkably, scarily easy to relate. Can't resist a little jibe to lighten the mood, though. "You must have been one special snowflake that she put up with you."

It gets her a frown and a growl that she didn't know he was even capable of, "Watch it, _Commander_."

At that, she just has to snort and it's nice to hear him join her in her silent chuckling a moment later. She can't even resist mimicking his growl and his words before sobering up again. His story's not finished, not be a long shot. So she tries to see if she got the crucial point right. "What happened to her?"

"Killed in action." Yes. Of _course_ she had to step right into _that_. She should have _known_ that, they way his voice softened every time he mentioned her name. And the dog tags in his hand that she only just saw now. How long has been running them through his fingers again and again? "Only a couple hours after we kissed for the first time. Actually, the only time."

Aw, shit. She lost buddies, too, fellow Marines that bought it one way or the other. One of them even had been something of a fuck buddy or maybe boyfriend. But she didn't lose either of them in _freshman year_. Somehow, some way, a lot of things concerning him she always wondered about are a lot more clearer all of a sudden. She nearly takes the hand that's fiddling with the dog tags just to make him _stop_. "God, Tomâ€|"

"It's alright." So he wouldn't want her pity and she knows that. Only it's not pity she's feeling. It's something a lot deeper, a lot _sadder_. "It was a Covenant surprise attack. They said no one could have predicted it." His voice nearly gives out for a while and she

gives him time to recover before she hears him add, "For a while, I even wanted to believe that," sounding so bitter that she thinks she realizes where his personal aversion against ONI stems from, the one that doesn't have anything to do with him being woodentop Navy.

There's a moment of silence between them in which she doesn't know what to say, if she should apologize again to him for using Circinius IV to wound him when she had no idea how sharp the blade she'd been wielding against him had been. It takes her a few minutes to finally settle on, "How did you survive?"

He snorts but there's nothing humorous about it. "You're gonna love this. Master Chief."

Aha, no way. Nuh-uh. Um-um. "Now you're fucking with me. He can't have been more than fifteen at that time."

And then she remembers what she learned about the SPARTAN program history during augmentation. But before she can correct her mistake, he says, "Believe me, I'm not kidding you. It was Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 who pulled me and two of my fellow cadets out of the wreckage of Circinius IV." And she's so, so grateful for that. Next time she sees the Chief, she's gonna have to buy him a beer or whatever else the II's drink to unwind. "Wouldn't be sitting here today if it hadn't been for him. Gave me this piece of Hunter armor after I helped him down it."

He holds up a piece of rounded, smoothed shrapnel hung on the same chain as Silva's dog tags. It's nearly indistinguishable from a stone that might have washed up on a shore but she still believes him. Tom isn't the sort of person to make something like that up. There really is only one thing left to say in this moment. "Wellâ€| fuck me."

There's so much to process right now, so many things she never knew about Tom, so many things she didn't know about herself and she doesn't even know which ones she needs to stop thinking about sooner. Thank God the story isn't finished yet, though. Maybe she can stall having to cope with what he told her for at least a few more minutes. "What would have happened if there hadn't been the Covenant attack?"

He shrugs. "I probably would have left Corbulo the next day."

Huh? "Why?"

His answer surprises her. "That emergency drill number Roland did on us yesterdayâ€|"

"What about it?" Because she's got no idea what that has to do with Corbulo. Tom for his part doesn't answer directly, instead starts to pull his shirt over his headâ€| to reveal blisters and raw skin and an awful shitload of small scars on the skin of his back. As if this has been happening regularly to him and he couldn't always stop himself from itching hard enough to draw blood.

Good God. "Shit, Tom, that's some serious Freezer burn."

He shakes his head and she actually has to force herself to keep

looking at his maltreated back. That must hurt like a bitch. "No Freezer burn. Cytoprethaline allergy." Aâ€¦ what? "Only about every fiftieth-thousandth person gets it." Okay, that would explain why she never heardâ€¦ "Results in raw and blistered skin, along with respiratoryâ€¦" as if on cue, a really bad cough is wrecking his body, sounding like he really should see a doctor about this, "respiratory problems after cryosleep." He coughs again and instinctively, she wants to reach out to him, put a hand on his back, just anything but he waves her off, straightens up again and after a few deep breaths that didn't sound very reassuring, either, says, "No, it's gonna be okay, Sarah."

Like fucking hell. "Doesn't look like it to me."

He puts on his shirt again and says, his voice a little muffled until he pulled it down over his head, "Trust me. A couple years ago they invented a drug, some kind of antihistamine or something that counters the effects of the cyto." And why hasn't he been taking it? "I just have to wait a couple hours after cryosleep before I can start injecting it." Oh, right. "Another hour and I'll be mostly fine."

Err, what? "Mostly?"

"It usually takes two or three injections for the stuff to take full effect and when that happens, everything's back to normal. I swear." It's his "don't pity me" face, mixed with "let it go" and "I'll make your life hell for the rest of your life if you tell this to anyone outside this room". As if she ever would. And damn him for not even letting her say that out loud by diverting her attention with, "Now you."

Yeah, well. She'd known she'd have to own up to what had caused her violent reaction during the fight in his ready room sooner or later. Of course she'd known that and she'd wished she hadn't. But then againâ€¦ it's probably only fair. She takes a deep breath herself. "She was there, during augmentation. Shortly before Parangosky bought it."

Being the smart kid he probably was even back at Corbulo despite trying to make her believe differently, Tom immediately picks up her pace. "Osman? What was she doing there?"

Yes, what had Osman been doing there, being Parangosky's anointed and all that? She takes a deep breath and leans her head back on the wall, almost closing her eyes to go back the four years to a period of pain and survival. "Teaching us a bit of the SPARTAN program's history." She wonders just how classified Osman's personal history is and then thinks fuck it, this is Tom and he just told her about his first time in combat. "She was supposed to become one of the IIs herself, did you know that?"

"No, I didn't." He doesn't sound as surprised as she expected. To be honest, he sounds more weary and like he half expected something like that to happen already. "What happenedâ€¦"

"She said she "washed out of the program". Told us how they tried to make her into one, how Halseyâ€¦" She closes her eyes, trying to get the images out of her head that Osman planted there by showing them pictures of surgical teams in sterile rooms operating on children

that looked to be too young to be doing anything but getting in fights at school and finding the other sex "icky". "How sheâ€| they were ten, eleven, twelve when they started augmentation, Tom."

He doesn't say anything, for a very long time and when she risks a glance to her left, she sees him staring straight ahead, with his forehead slightly knotted, like he always does when he's pondering something especially difficult to process. He saw her after her last surgery, still in a hospital bed. She'll never forget his look when he sat down next to her and saw all those fresh new scars on her arm alone.

It doesn't really surprise her when he finally comes up with, "She really, really hates Halsey, doesn't she?"

For a moment, she's tempted to tell him that really was a no-brainer but then again, he very obviously didn't know the extent or Osman's hatred towards Halsey. She hopes she could alleviate at least one of his worries. She nods. "Yeah. And honestly, after hearing thatâ€|"

"Did she tell you who backed Halsey? Because she can't have done it all alone." Okay, not what she expected he'd say. Sometimes, she hates it when he's so fucking right about things.

So fucking right and making such a good point. And the only thing she can put against that is, "No, she didn't." He wants to interject something but she keeps on talking, because he needs to know what she has to tell him. "For us it was enough to know what they did to the IIs. They're likeâ€| our older cousins, the people who paved the road." They're even more than that to her, even though she knows the IIs probably don't see it that way. "They're our kin, Tom."

He nods, slowly, probably taking it all in, and not even judging her, if she's lucky. Then he says, in this thoughtful tone he sometimes has when he isn't quite done thinking about something but needs to voice an opinion anyway, "And she wants to use us for her dirty work."

Aw, not that again. "Iâ€|"

"You're smarter than that, Sarah. You know she does." Apparently, he's done thinking about it and he still stands by his decision to refuse to execute Osman's order. She wishes he'd stop that, if only to escape Osman's wrath. She heard Osman talk, she heard the cold in her voice when she talked about all those people who did terrible things to her body and soul and what she was going to do to them once she found them. She heard whispers about Kilo-Five as well. Osman's personal bloodhounds, sniffing out every trail she put them on and ripping the offender to shreds once they found them.

Her heart clenches when she imagines them being set on Tom's trails. She doesn't tell him that, though. He wouldn't believe her, anyway. So she falls back to the tried and true. "Halsey's still a war criminal, Tom."

He gives a short humorless laugh, probably because that's nothing she needs to emphasize, not to him. They never had issues about that. "And we still need to put her on trial."

He's right, of course. He's been right with that ever since their fight in his ready room, ever since she told him she'd taken over the order from him so he wouldn't end up in front of a court-martial for not executing it. It still rankles her that he just has to be so decent and rational, while she always feels her blood pressure surge and her fight-or-flight response pumping up her body chemistry whenever she hears the name Halsey. Maybe they should all just hope that the hinge-heads tire of her and take that problem off the UNSC's hands.

As if hoping ever solved anything. She nearly sighs. "What are we gonna do now?"

There's that humorless laugh again and he leans forward, his elbows on his thighs and his head in his hands, his voice muffled a little when he says, "Fucked if I know, Sarah," and very clearly audible when he lifts his face a little and repeats, "Fucked if I know."

She looks at him, at his hunched posture and sees all those years edged into his face, onto his body. She sees it in so, so serious those eyes, and in those so, so calloused hands running through his hair and with just the slightest tremor, and in those little lines pricking at the corners of his eyes.

It's funny, she thinks. She always thought they were lines of laughter because he could make her laugh, and she just never seemed to have realized that his laughter always sounded like he was the last survivor of a planetary massacre, that his eyes saw countless friends and fellow soldiers and subordinates die, just as hers and that his hands took a dying friend's dog tags from her when he was fourteen fucking years old.

I love you.

So. This is how Commander Sarah Palmer should have reacted when she realized she loves Captain Thomas Lasky: incredulous, ashamed, enraged, scared, panicked.

This is how Commander Sarah Palmer feels when she realizes she loves Captain Thomas Lasky: relieved, unsurprised, just like she always feels concerning Tom. Because since eight years ago, he is just there. Even when he's not sitting in her quarters and competing with your regular smart AI in trying to think himself to death, he's there. There's comfort in that knowledge and even someone like her needs something like that.

Though apparently, hers doesn't come solely from knowing that the only thing her armor can't protect her from is herself and the key to being invincible is learning how to protect yourself from your own worst enemy, like she always thought.

Fancy fucking that, she thinks and just stops herself from smiling that smile her SPARTANS hate because it means she just found a new and very creative way to keep them busy â€“ or, as they would say, torment them â€“ and is very, very pleased about herself. Tom always suspects that she found a new and very creative way to keep him busy by tormenting her SPARTANS when he catches her doing that.

I love you.

She smiles it anyway. "Soâ€| are there any stories where you _didn't_ totally lose?"

He looks up and leans back against the wall behind them, gingerly and she wonders if he's really going to be okay as fast and as easily as he tried to make her believe. He frowns at her. Shit, she thinks. I did it again. Hit the landmine full front, gonna be blown to bits right away. "Wellâ€| not a lot of them, to be honest." Okay, not gonna be blown up right away. Maybe it's a time-delayed detonator. "There is one, thoughâ€|"

"Come on, don't be shy, share it with the class, Cadet." Make me laugh, Tom. Make _yourself_ laugh. Let that story have a happy ending.

"Alright, alright." He raises his hands in defeat and clears his throat. She hopes it's just stalling because that cough a couple minutes ago _did not sound_ healthy. "It was the last exercise of the term and they'd made me team leader, probably one last time before they were kicking me out anyway or something. Anyway, it was Capture the Flag, right? So, what happened was thisâ€|"

He tells her about how he used the lesson on Hannibal he and his friends had only a couple days earlier to confound the enemy team and even makes passing out from the allergy sound funny as hell and she's so glad that he's still here and tells her stories he never before told her and makes her feel less like an asshole for trying to use his Corbulo days as a weapon against him.

Maybe they still have a chance to get through this with only a few bruises instead of Osman ripping their trachea out and their friendship apart. Maybe they'll find themselves in front of a firing squad as soon as next week.

No use thinking about it now, anyway. She's got her captain to keep safe and sane for as long as she can and that means she's got to keep _herself_ safe and sane for as long as she can and right now, that involves sitting on her bunk with him and making sure he doesn't go on imitating a rampant AI. What else is there to do for you when you're his de facto second in command and can't bear to see him beat himself up?

5. A Hundred Tanks Along the Square

**A/N: **Um. I have no idea how this happened. I just kind of started writing it and then _this_ came out. I'm pretty sure that by the time S2 of Spartan Ops rolls around, this'll be obsolete and AU but what the heck, this needed to be done anyway. So... what do you think?

* * *

><p>A Hundred Tanks Along The Square

"_A hundred tanks along the square, one man stands and stops them there

>Someday soon the tide'll turn and I'll be free
Well I'll be free, I'll be free, I'll come home to my country

>Someday soon the tide'll turn and I'll be free."

The Hooters, "500 Miles"

So that went well.

No, it didn't but compared to having been drawn, quartered and then left to the SPARTANS for them to play with it could have gone worse. She didn't even shout but then again, for some reason he doesn't think CINCONI needs to scream much or often. She didn't even relieve him of his command of _Infinity_ which was probably the greatest surprise to him and served pretty well to soften the blow of being ripped a new one by Serin Osman.

Then again, she did threaten him with feeding him to Jul 'Mdama personally as soon as they found him and Halsey.

Ah, shit, that was probably one of those moments his mother would have relished with a kind of stern faced "I told you so, Thomas" glee that only Colonel Marianne Lasky could produce. And he didn't even tell Sarah yet. All he'd done since receiving the call from Osman he'd been dreading for two weeks now had been telling Roland to ping him only when absolutely necessary â€“ he stated the ship being invaded by zombie SPARTANS created with that Promethean technology 'Mdama owns as example â€“ grab his work-out clothes and jog down to the atrium.

When they'd installed it, he'd wondered what the hell they wanted with a damn _forest_ on a war ship â€“ because let's face it, _Infinity_ was never intended to be anything _but_ a battle ship â€“ but since they made him Captain, he's come to appreciate the greenery. It's not the first time that he comes to a little clearing with actual, real, probably bio-engineered grass to lie down and stare at the artificial light source in the far above "sky". Sometimes it helps him clear his mind and get a better perspective on things.

Sometimes it serves to empty it so he doesn't have to think of anything or anyone. If he's being honest, it's very rare that he comes here for the first.

He's not being honest now, though. He's staring at the ceiling and trying to forget.

Forget how Osman crept him out with her even tone and her slightly disapproving face. Forget how she made it clear to him that he would find Halsey and 'Mdama or die trying. Forget how she told him to personally execute Halsey again.

Forget how he told her what she could do with _that_ order.

Oh, not that he actually said _that_. But he did try to make clear to her that he thought it a pretty bad idea to make woodentop Navy officers into personal executioners for ONI personnel's grudges. He was being polite and submissive and cautious. He nearly ended up being skewered and _then_ relieved of his command by her, anyway.

And he can't stop wondering why she _didn't_. It's not like one of his adjutants â€“ the one on duty during the call â€“ isn't an ONI operative. He found out only recently and he wonders what Sarah will

have to face once Osman finds out about that but it doesn't really bother him. If she activates Baumann, so be it. He has faced worse things than _that_.

Sarah being punished for telling him, thoughâ€| that's gonna be a hell lotta tougher. He tries not to think about it, reminds himself of how much more than him Sarah can endure, how many more sources of strength she has, how much more Osman likes SPARTANS than regular Navy. Stillâ€|

"I can't believe you really dug yourself in to mope here." Shit, what the hell is Sarah doing here all of a sudden? How did she evenâ€| "Roland told me."

Right. "Remind me to fry his circuits when I get back to the bridge."

She grins and gestures for him to stay on the ground, lowering herself next to him. "Try not to. We still need him to fly this boat." Sometimes, he wonders if that kind of thing is a remnant of her past as a marine or if she just does that to rile up his "woodentop Navy ass", as she sometimes likes to call it, not without a weird kind of fondness to it in her tone.

"He's gonna be flying nothing bigger than a Warthog when I'm done with him." It makes her snort, decidedly unladylike and he loves that about her.

"Warthogs don't fly, remember that, _Captain_?" He's not looking at her, now that they're both lying on their backs, staring up at the immense sphere of light simulating a sun to keep the plants inside the atrium from dying. He's still sure that _that_ actually _was_ straight out of her past as a marine. He loves that he knows stuff like that without having to look at her.

It's his turn to snort now. "Believe me, they do. That one time on Circinius IVâ€|" Two weeks ago, before he came to Sarah's quarters and tugged up her wet suit and told her about Chyler while he tried not to dwell on the fact that his finger just brushed the bare skin of Sarah's back, this would have been accidental and his voice would have sounded tight and harsh and bitter.

It's not a miracle that it wasn't and it didn't, not really. It's not a miracle that she knows exactly what he meant and that she could acknowledge the fact that he just made a joke about the worst and maybe best thing that ever happened to him with another snort, even if it still feels like one.

There's silence, then. Just two people lying next to each other, breathing almost in synch â€" he won't question how he knows that because that would just mean Bad Things, as Caedmon would have said â€" and pretending they're not on a war ship. It's nice, actually.

Until she goes and has to say, "I'm glad she didn't just tell Baumann to get rid of you discretely."

Sometimes he wonders why he ever considered having her as a de facto second in command sounded like a good idea to him but then she goes and tells him things like that. That's one fucked up friendship, he

thinks and can't help smiling a moment before feeling himself turning into a cynic. "How do you know she hasn't?"

Instead of an answer, he gets silence, at least for a few moments and something about that doesn't feel quite right, especially when the only thing she does say ends up being, "You're still here, aren't you?" a tad too quiet for her usual self. He thinks it better not to wonder what the hell is suddenly up with that.

He keeps staring up at the artificial light source, seeing over 30 years of his career happening in front of his eyes, in a kind of condensed so this is how it's going to end way. "That doesn't have to mean anything." I can't believe I need to tell you that, he wants to add but even though she doesn't say anything, doesn't even change her rhythm of breathing or moves a finger, he somehow knows she wouldn't react too kindly to that.

"My," she says, sarcasm dripping all over the floor, "aren't we a merry ray of sunshine today."

You'd be, too, if you'd been on the receiving end of an Osman style dressing down, he thinks. I'm sure I don't have to tell you how disappointed I am in you, Captain. Disappointed, his ass. He keeps staring upward and against the faint humming of the ship's engines, he can hear her breathing, inhumanly even and measured, all regular.

Once, after her augmentation, when he'd thought he'd accepted what and who she'd become, he'd had a flash of delusions of grandeur and had asked her to go on a run with him. He'd only understood why she'd smirked like that as she'd set out when he'd been running after her, thinking his lungs were on fire and she'd been breathing exactly the same she's breathing now. It had taken him another year to get used to never even hearing a hitch in her breathing break her stride.

That is reason enough to whip around his head in concern the moment he hears the first disturbance of breathing he heard from her in years before she says, "She wants to divide and conquer, Tom."

It's not like Parangosky didn't do it, too. In fact, she was a master at it. Making him Captain of Infinity for disobeying his commanding officer's orders was one of her last major strikes. Making Osman CINCONI really was her last strike. They'd announced her death an hour after Osman's promotion was made official.

But never, never has he ever seen that kind of pain he just heard in Sarah's voice and saw in the slight frown on her face. "So what's new in that, Commander?"

"Damnit, Tom." That he can deal with. Her usual hot-headed, profane, impatient self. He's even kind of thankful for it because the anger in her eyes seems to have beaten the pain when she sets up in a jerk of barely contained SPARTAN energy.

He follows, more measured and doesn't roll his eyes. "What? You know it isn't. That's just how ONI operates. It's probably in their blood and they can't do anything against it, just like we can'tâ€!"

"You have no idea what's in their blood!" Allusions again. Damnit.

"I was just reminded of the fact that I still need to unlawfully execute a war criminal if I want to keep my command, Sarah!" How is it that they seem to be ending up in fights so much lately? "Yes, I very well know what'sâ€|"

"You know nothing. Why the fuck are you just not listening to me? I told youâ€|" And what in God's name is making her so afraid of the damn ONI?

Being afraid just is not how he knows her. "Yes, I know what you told me. She's out for my blood, she's probably out for yours, too, we need to heed her order, she's got people on the ship, I know, Sarah!"

"No, you don't, Tom!" Somehow, they managed to end up sitting on the ground, their faces only inches apart from each other and it takes a moment for him to register her dilated pupils, slightly parted lips, angry frown, faintly irregular breathing.

Kiss me, Sarah.

That wasn't supposed to be in his head right here, right now. It wasn't supposed to be in his head at any time. It wasn't supposed to be in his head at all. And still he's sitting here and staring at her and not daring to lower his gaze to her lips again and all he can think of is wondering how it ever came to him knowing her so well that all the anger in her face can't fool him about the pain lurking beneath.

Kiss me and let me make it better.

This is what he wants to say and he wants to say it so badly, worse even than he wanted Chyler to kiss him, wanted to kiss Chyler. He wants to tell her to kiss him so he doesn't have to do it himself, doesn't have to be the one breaking their friendship for some foolish desire without a place between superior and subordinate. This is what he wants to say to her.

And this is what he says, "What's going on, Sarah?"

As far as he's concerned this is as far as he can go to say kiss me without using the actual words. As far as Sarah's concernedâ€|" "She talked to me, too." So. Alright. It's not like he shouldn't have expected it. It's just that he didn't. Not that fast, anyway.

He's kind of grateful to her for saying that and bringing a little distance between them. He's not sure if he could have done the same. He's not sure if he hadn't kissed her anyway if she'd waited just a microsecond longer. "What did she say?"

Sarah squirms and that's just not her. For a moment, just a very small one, he feels the irrational desire to rip Osman a new one, just for making Sarah act like someone she isn't, someone who feels like there are things she can't tell him but then she seems to have caught herself and the impulse shrinks back. "She told me to have an eye on you." That was to be expected, wasn't it? "She told me to make sure to keep you in line." That, too. "In fact, she said that I was

"authorized" and "advised" to use any force I "deem necessary" to make sure you go with her orders this time."

The sad thing is: even that was to be expected. What wasn't to be expected was Sarah spelling it out for the both of them. "I'm the agent, Tom."

He doesn't want to rip Osman a new one anymore. He wants use an ODST field knife and put it to good use on the Admiral's skin and that's really all he can think at the moment because the exact contents of what he wants to do right now scare the living shit out of him. This isn't a bit of ONI scheming anymore. It's not even petty revenge. It means fucking war. Briefly he wonders whether this is stupid enough of Osman to make Parangosky return from the grave but he buries that hope pretty fast under fear and urgency and racing thoughts on what the hell to do with that information.

There's a moment when all he wants to do is lean over and hug her to tell her it's gonna be okay, tell her he knows where her loyalties lie, tell her they're gonna tell Osman what to do with that order. There's another one when he wants to call Osman and ask her what the hell she thinks she's doing, fucking up his chain of command and everything. There's a third one when he wants to stay here forever, never go back outside, never wonder just how well he really knows Sarah and her loyalties.

There's one, in the end, that reminds him that he isn't fourteen years old anymore, and the boy who fell in love with Chyler Silva isn't the man who fell in love with Sarah Palmer. The boy who helped down a Hunter while shitting himself with fear isn't the man who commands the biggest battle ship Earth ever built.

"You know," he tells her, his voice even and a bit contemplative, just for effect, "it takes two to tango." At least she's not looking like she has a very heard time at not freaking out right here right now anymore. In fact, she looks a lot like she just started to seriously doubt his sanity. "Divide and conquer only ever works if there are people you can divide and conquer."

She takes a moment to answer. A moment in which he's almost 100% sure that she'll call Roland and ask him to have Infinity's commander confined to sick bay for the time being. "Soâ€œ| this is what your mother sent you to military school for?"

Ah, and that's what you get for trying to be meaningful. He did seem to have cheered her up, though. "It worked, didn't it?"

Still doubting his sanityâ€œ| and suddenly, reluctantly, like she's not sure if she really wants to, snorting and laughing, welling up in short bursts and fascinating little waves until they're both shaken by the most inappropriate laughing fit he ever had and maybe that's why it's so good that it makes them exhausted enough to lie down on their backs again, his breathing evening out much slower than hers.

She's the first to speak again. "God, we're so screwed."

It's a bit of stating the obvious but it doesn't mean it's not true. She forgot something, though. "Yeah, but we're screwed together."

He hears a last little snort from her before she falls silent for a few, long minutes. So long that he's almost dozed off when he hears her say, "Tom?"

Not sure if he really wants to hear what she has to say, he leaves it a non-committal, "Mh?"

She actually manages to surprise him. "There's no one I'd rather be screwed with than you."

Huh.

For a weird, insane moment, this sounds suspiciously like I love you but that's probably just his brain being too fucked up after those last couple weeks.

And it must be because when he says, "Same here, Sarah. Same here," after an infinite minute of silence what it really sounds like is I love you, too and it doesn't even feel that bad. It feels quite good actually, which is the only reason he doesn't ruin the moment with any more ill-advised words, just lies there staring up at the artificial sun and listening to Sarah breathe next to him, for a few more minutes before they need to get back to what they're supposed to do. What else is there to do for you when your best friend is supposed to be the one neutralizing you when you misbehave next time, anyway?

6. Never to Touch

A/N: So, I was asked to have them kiss... and I did. I'm just not sure if this is the desired result.

Also, thanks to everyone for their lovely reviews and the favorites and the subscriptions! I'll get to your PMs as soon as I can and rest assured, I really do appreciate each and everyone of them!

* * *

><p>Never to Touch (And Never to Keep)

"Well you see her when you fall asleep
>But never to touch and never to keep
'Cause you loved her too much
>And you dived too deep

Well you only need the light when it's burning low
>Only miss the sun when it starts to snow
>Only know you love her when you let her go."

Passenger, "Let Her Go"

It's funny, he thinks. He'd somehow expected that things between them would be different, somehow, someway, after he'd had the sudden epiphany in the atrium about wanting her to kiss him so, so badly. He expected something would be different. But it's been the same, all along. Same banter, same fighting, same camaraderie.

Only he caught himself looking at her kind of absentmindedly for just a moment too long when Roland briefs them on the latest news

concerning 'Mdama and Halsey, how they're dragging a trail of destruction behind them on the run from _Infinity_ or instantly worrying how she would deal with it when Osman informs them that they'd soon receive additional support in their search from a certain SPARTAN Master Chief.

Or leaning on the terminal and gripping it so hard that his hands both hurt while listening to the radio traffic from the ground and watching the events unfold in the 3D hologram in front of him. Watching an entire fireteam going down from too much Elite and Promethean fire, just like that. Being glad that it wasn't hers and feeling so, so guilty for it immediately. Just like now.

"Captain, tactical analysis says we need to withdraw the fireteams. The odds are too great." For a moment, he's tempted to quote a several hundred years old science fiction flick and telling Roland never to tell him the odds but he reminds himself just in time that Roland would take that as an invitation to start lecturing him on 20th century war pop culture.

In the hologram, a miniature version of Sarah â€“ it's funny how it's so easy for him to recognize her form, just from the way she moves and fights â€“ orders the Chief to take the fireteam he's attached to for the time being to guard their rear from any Prometheans daring to snatch any of her precious SPARTANS. They're not making any headway now, being firmly entrenched in an ancient Forerunner structure 'Mdama's fighters were guarding some project or other in that had Glassman in hysterics the moment they told him about it.

It really doesn't look too good but those are SPARTANS and they have the Chief with them. They probably wouldn't obey him if he ordered them to abort anyway. "Captain?"

He shakes his head. "Not yet, Roland."

"Captain, with all due respectâ€|" Every time Roland uses that, he's about to be thoroughly disrespectful so he doesn't give him time to say whatever he was about to say.

"She's got the situation under control. What do you think she's going to do to me if I order her to abort now?" Never, never again he wants to experience the horrible kind of Cold War they fought after he sent Majestic down to retrieve Halsey before Sarah could shoot her.

"Point taken, sir." Apparently, Roland remembers it none too fondly, either. So he keeps watching them in silent, seeing her downing enemy after enemy, hearing her issue orders in thatâ€| unique way of hers even to the Chief, insulting Elites and Prometheans and just generally being herself in all her SPARTAN glory.

And then suddenly, everything goes to hell. He has no idea what happened but one minute, Infinity's SPARTANS were holding their own, even starting to make some way forward again and thenâ€| everything is chaos. In the miniature versions on the terminal, it looks strangely detached but the radio traffic takes his heart and squeezes it until he has serious trouble not going back all the way to Circinus IV and seeing Chyler slowly die from the spire through her body. All the strength he can drag up goes into ordering the Pelicans to extract his soldiers.

There's confusion everywhere, SPARTANs going down, until it looks like Sarah and Chief are the last ones standing, trying to hold off the enclosing enemies from the Pelicans' LZ, taking turns in evacuating fallen SPARTANs behind crumbled walls. The minutes until he sees the Pelicans swoop in and release ODST and SPARTAN reinforcements to secure the extraction rank almost top in the most terrible minutes of his entire life.

Maybe things changed, after all.

However, now's not the time to contemplate it and as soon as the Pelicans lifted off the Forerunner structure, he tells his XO he's got the bridge and makes his way down to the hangar bay, Roland's voice with status updates on the evacuated SPARTANs constantly in his ear.

When he arrives, the Pelicans are already there and being unloaded. There are too many stretchers being lifted by infirmary personnel. Too many stretchers with a sheet covering the bulk of a SPARTAN armor. Sarah's not among them. He knows that and he tries to tell himself he needs to make it believable to the crew that none of them are, that SPARTANs never die but when he sees Sarah exiting one of the Pelicans and taking off her helmet, slowly walking up to him and looking at him with empty eyes before passing him wordlessly, he finds himself unable to hold up the carefully propagated lie.

He turns around but doesn't follow her, just looks at her and for a terrible moment all he can think of when he sees her back and the drag in her step is that this is how a broken SPARTAN looks. It's already very apparent that this is the biggest loss of life under her command yet, both as a SPARTAN and as an ODST commander.

"Commander Palmer is not a SPARTAN, sir." He turns around, not really having registered that someone just talked to him for a momentâ€¦ coming face to face with the Chief.

Or, well, face to chest plate, anyway. Craning his neck a little, he looks at the visor, closed as ever and he realizes what the Chief just said to him. He looks away. "I don't thinkâ€¦"

"She's not a SPARTAN tonight, sir." What is she then, he thinks as he stares at that visor, for a crazy moment he thinks he sees something in it, somethingâ€¦ "She's human."

Yes, maybe that's what he just saw in that visor. Something human. For a moment, he fails to find any words, his mind emptied by a nameless, strange exhaustion. And then the only thing that he does find to reply is, "Debriefing tomorrow at 0800, Chief."

That's probably the most meaningless thing he ever said to anyone in his entire life.

For a moment, it looks like the Chief might be thinking the exact same thing and he realizes that thinking Sarah was the only SPARTAN he could read with their helmets on was a misconception. Maybe he can't read all of themâ€¦ but knowing Sarah apparently taught him more than he always assumed.

He's kind of grateful for the Chief when he acknowledges the order

with a slight nod and a "Yes, sir," before walking away, heavy steps reverberating on the deck plates. It's not the first time that he finds himself wondering if it's just him or if there still seems to be a visible reminder of the Chief not being quite whole anymore.

It takes him another moment of staring after the Chief with the same kind of empty minds that made him say that stupid thing he just said until he takes in the activity in the hangar for one last time, checking if the situation is under control, kind of glad that his crew is trained well enough for their captain only being in the way in that kind of situation. Convinced that there's nothing he can do, he makes himself return to the bridge for the remainder of his shift.

It's uneventful and neither Osman nor Roland nor any unpleasant surprises left over by the Sangheili that kicked Infinity's SPARTANS' asses disrupt the quiet aftermath of what happened down on that planet. A few times throughout the shift, he almost yearns for something to do, to keep him occupied, to keep him on the bridge after his shift is finished but nothing happens and he walks back to his quarters, feet heavy with another mission gone down the drain.

Arriving in his quarters, he contemplates going on a run for a moment, until he sees the desk full of unread mission reports, communiqû@s and the day to day dredge of a UNSC battleship captain and he almost welcomes it. If nothing else, it's a suitable excuse for not going to bed right away.

Not really thinking about it, he sheds his uniform, shrugs it off, lets the pieces lie where they fall and pulls on the looser, more comfortable skin of an off-duty officer, already reading reports off his screen in between pulling on another set of pants and shirt. He only realizes that the usual effect of his off-duty self replacing Infinity's captain never fell in place after he's been sitting at his desk for two hours and didn't even get to the communiqû@s yet when there's a knock on his door.

Usually, Roland alerts him to anyone approaching his personal quarters looking about to be wanting something from him. Usually, Sarah is the only one Roland doesn't alert him to. Maybe the AI really is afraid of her, as she once claimed.

Either way he just looks at the door for a tiny, hesitant moment and then he remembers how she looked when she walked away from him on the deck. He's up before he can second-guess himself, opens the door before he can consider a different course of action and he stares at her for a painful moment, long enough to register the slight almost undetectable slump in her posture and the rawness in her look, before he reaches up to pull her down to cover her mouth with his.

There's this moment, infinitesimally small in which he wonders why the hell he just did that and then there's a much more troubling moment in which he wonders why the hell she doesn't shove him into the nearest wall and tells him to never, ever do that again or she will end him.

Instead, she hesitates, just for the blink of an eye, before giving in and leaning in and giving him back what he never expected he'd be able to give her. He's not sure but one of them must have had some

sense left in their head because he feels himself move backwards, away from the door, shuffling, stumbling, still kissing her and grabbing her hips and pressing her against the door that closed automatically.

He'd like to say that he has no idea where that came from and that he lets go of her immediately, apologizing profoundly and hoping they'll never mention it again. It's just that this isn't how it happens. He knows exactly where that came from and he has no inclination whatsoever of letting her go.

Mainly because she doesn't seem to, either.

In a flurry of hands and mouths, they make it over to his bed and he'd never think he'd hear Sarah Palmer laugh as throaty as she does when he tries to get the damn body suit off her, muttering about damn SPARTANS always having to be such damn overachievers about their combat readiness. But then again, the wrestling it off only serves as an additional turn on.

And then, it's off and she's beautiful beneath it and she feels exactly like he remembers from touching her back and he'd never have thought that Sarah Palmer would feel like that, all soft and silky and strong. He's on top of her and she's arching her back when he grabs her hips and the thrill it gives him nearly prematurely ends this whole thing.

She's challenging him, God, she is because she's burying her hands in his hair and she's scraping her nails across his back, just enough pressure to give him a kick. Somewhere deep down he still knows he shouldn't be doing this " they shouldn't be doing this " but she's Sarah and he waited for this for ages, probably ever since he met her for the first time and she was hurting and he just wants to make it better.

God, he knows he should be taking his time but she makes it impossible for him, urging him on in that determined way of hers, making it impossible for him to stop and catch his breath, discover her, discover himself, just urging him on and on and on.

In the end, it's over as fast and as suddenly as it began but damn, he doesn't regret it, not one bit, not when she doesn't even make a move to get off the bed, instead scoots to the side, to give him some room and he swears he was never happier about his partner drifting off to sleep almost as soon as she let out her last moan than right now. She earned it. She fucking earned being able to fall asleep so easily.

When he finally falls asleep himself, after too many minutes of contemplating her sleeping form next to him and the pretty much inappropriate feelings of protectiveness she stirs deep inside of him, it's probably the first time since he moved into his quarters on Infinity that he doesn't either knock on the wall next to him or touches the ceiling above him, the CAMS creed he had etched into it when he moved in but it just feels so right so he never even thinks about questioning it.

It's only when he wakes up alone in his bed hours later, all traces of her ever having been in his room last night gone, that he wonders if he probably just made the biggest mistake of his life.

7. But The River Is So Wide

**A/N: **Holiday Fic Request Meme, attempt #4. By now, I'm totally, horribly, probably irrevocably behind the schedule but I'm still determined to see this one through, and if I have to keep writing well into January. So even if I skipped a couple prompts, don't worry. They'll get written. This one was kinda nice, BTW, because I finally got to go back to my *_We Were Soldiers Once (And Young)_* series and I finally got the kick in the ass I needed to pick up where we left. So, err... let's see where we are now?

* * *

><p>But The River Is So Wide

" _Well I would swim but the river is so wide
>And I'm scared I won't make it to the other side
Well God knows
I've failed but He knows that I've tried
>I long for something that's safe and warm
But all I have is all
that is gone
>I'm as helpless and as hopeless as a feather on the
Clyde."

Passenger, "Feather on the Clyde"

She knows this: it can't go on like this between the two of them.

She knows this, too: there's no way she can end it without at least one of them losing even more than just their dignity.

And yet she's here, standing in front of his quarters, her hand raised to knock and tell him that they need to call it quits or something really bad is gonna happen. They both know it, have known it ever since that fucked up mission she lost three quarters of her Spartans, the one she ended up in his quarters after something entirely else than talking for the first time. They both know it has to stop, and yet she kept showing up at his quarters after bad missions and he kept showing up at hers after losing ships and pilots and crews. After another harrowing ONI call.

They never talk when they show up at each other's doorsteps, not anymore but that's not her problem. They've never been great talkers, the both of them, and until a few months ago, they hadn't needed a great many words to understand each other in the first place. They were never very physical with each other, either but that doesn't mean that the sex isn't great because let's face it, it actually is. Full of regret and pain and guilt but nothing to turn up your nose at.

She honestly never thought that someone like Tom could be that passionate, that hungry, that tender. She always thought Tom was all about moderation, subtlety, caution, and she still finds herself surprised when he's the one to initiate it one way or the other. And holy shit, does she love it when he does that. That one really surprised her but hell, she can't get enough of Tom taking command before relinquishing it to her in the exact right moment. She loves a whole lotta things about sleeping with Tom, if she's honest with

herself.

And that's why they can't go on like this. It's not the fact that they've been seen â€“ Gabriel Thorne is probably the last guy who'd report them â€“ it's not the fact that it's messing with their work routine because it isn't, it's that it's breaking her heart.

Some people, they say that where other people have a heart that can be broken, Spartans have a core of dark matter, fueling them with energy and sucking away every last bit of emotion. Some people are fucking idiots. And she really just fucking needs to knock on that door and be done with it.

It's just that it may not wise to break up with a Spartan, especially if that Spartan happens to be Sarah Palmer but that it's not exceptionally smart to break up with an UNSC naval captain, either. Especially if that captain happens to be Thomas Lasky. Especially if it's more than just sex, at least for one party involved. And that party is her, and she needs to get over it as fast as she can, and so she finally raises her first one last time and knocks on the door to Tom's stateroom.

At first, nothing happens, and she nearly turns on her heels but she's a Spartan, and Spartans don't give up without even trying, and that's why she's still there when his door opens. The first thing she thinks when she sees him is that he looks tired. Not "just woken up tired" or "having worked a thirty-hours shift" tired. Tired as if he hasn't slept in days, as if he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, as if he's been doing it for thirty years. Lately, he's always looking like that when he got another call from Osman.

By now she's ready to shoot the bitch herself, just to make it end.

He's still standing there, still looking tired, and her resolve crumbles like a killed Promethean. All she gets out is a feeble, "Hey."

And then he makes it all worse by running a hand through his hair and giving her a relieved little smile, saying, "Just the person I was looking for. Come on in."

She shouldn't. She shouldn't take up his offer because she'll inevitably end up kissing him and gently pushing him towards his bed and hating herself for enjoying it so damn much all the way until he's asleep and she slips out of his stateroom, like she's been doing for way too many weeks now. She doesn't even hesitate to follow him inside.

His quarters look as messy as he looks tired, and that's when she really starts to get worried. They've been hunting M'dama and Halsey all over the galaxy, while Osman is slowly tightening the thumbscrews, and up to now he managed to stay on top of it, stayed professional, determined, focused. Thisâ€¦ isn't Tom, or at least not the Tom she knows. They really do have a problem.

Which is, come to think of it, why this is the exactly wrong moment to break up whatever weird fuckbuddies thing they have going on and exactly why she has to do it now. When she takes a deep breath and

he looks at her, only mild curiosity in his eyes, she thinks that for a moment, someone must have filled her lungs with lead. She goes through with it anyway. "Tomâ€œ we need to talk."

His face falls, curiosity being replaced piece by piece with dread, disappointment, resignation. It breaks her heart and it's a dirty job but it needs to get done. And ever since there have been Spartans, getting dirty jobs done was their sole purpose in life. She squares her shoulders, setting out for another one. Just a job, she tells herself, just another dirty job. She can do that, can't she?

8. And When Those Blue Snowflakes

A/N: **Holiday Fic Request Meme, attempt #4. Technically, this should have been from Sarah's POV but since I like order in my series and since I alternate between Tom and Sarah and Sarah had her POV in the last story, this had to be from Tom's (it also made more sense, to be honest), so I hope **apinkpanthress forgives me for bending her prompt a little. I also hope she forgives me for taking so fucking long to actually write it in the first place but well, it's here now, and I hope you like it :)

* * *

><p>And When Those Blue Snowflakes Start Fallin' (That's When Those Blue Memories Start Callin')

"_I'll have a Blue Christmas without you
>I'll be so blue thinking about you
Decorations of red on a green Christmas tree
>Won't be the same dear, if you're not here with me

And the when those blue snowflakes start fallin'
>That's when those blue memories start callin'
>You'll be doin' all right, with your Christmas of white
>But I'll have a blue, blue, blue, blue Christmas."

Elvis Presley, "Blue Christmas"

You know what's curious? That even in space, on a battle ship, people still celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanza, Midwinter Solstice and a number of other end of the year/midwinter festivals that have developed over time. Even on a mission, even on high alert, people still decorate their quarters and workspaces, give presents to each other, even write cards, on actual paper to their loved ones on Earth and in the colonies. And usually, he's one of them.

Of course he doesn't write a four inches high stack of holiday cards, like Deviera, his logistics officer or decorates his console with a miniature tree including ornaments and a ridiculously blinking row of Christmas lights like Hallsen, one of the helmsmen. But usually, the holiday spirit onboard whichever ship he's serving on at the time is strong enough to wake a bit of nostalgia and for its sake, there's usually a small menorah on the desk in his ready room to honor the Jewish part of his ancestry and a bit of fir green above the alcove of his bed, decorated with ornaments he made out of ammunition shells and leftover hand grenade splints back in his first year at CAMS, together with Chyler and Sully, during a particularly silly and

overtired study break.

This yearâ€| not so much. There's still the menorah on his desk but even though it's the third night of Hanukkah, he didn't even light one candle yet and he never got around to weasel some fir green out of the botanists taking care of the atrium, let alone dig out the thirty years old ornaments. His quarters are a mess, anyway, mostly due to the fact that he doesn't use them for more than sleeping. Somehow, in the last few weeks, quarters wise, he managed to digress back to his teenage midterms at CAMS self, and if he had the time and leisure for it, he'd be worried about it.

As it is, he doesn't even know what to be worried about first, with so many things vying for his attention. There's another lead on 'Mdama and Halsey, one that's actually credible but also has the potential to be an even bigger massacre than the mission he sent Sarah and the Master Chief on beforeâ€| well, before. There are letters to write to next of kin, always letters to next of kin but somehow, around the holiday season it becomes even harder than usual. There's the day to day drivel of managing a war ship the size of a small city.

There also was Sarah, breaking up a relationship they didn't even have in the first place. And, ridiculously, that's the thing keeping him distracted on the bridge and keeping him awake at night. The only reason it doesn't also lead to an overall piss poor performance on his part is that in over thirty years in service, giving everything on the job was practically wired into his DNA. He can do it in his sleep now, and that's the only thing saving him right now.

It hasn't managed to save him from doing other stupid things, though. Specifically walking down the corridor towards Sarah's door. Even more specifically walking down the corridor towards Sarah's door, stopping in front of it and raising his hand, poised to knock, only to chicken out and retreat as fast as he can, hoping that no one but maybe Roland saw him do it. Even more specifically doing it multiple timesâ€| only to end up here again, just like now.

He's pretty sure that coming back here again and again, despite Sarah having been polite but very firm about wanting to stop whatever was going on between them before it could go further â€" he'd nearly asked her how much further than repeatedly, even practically regularly sleeping with each other it could go â€" rates in the top three of the most stupid things he has ever done. He should just let it go, honestly.

Most of all because Sarah was right, in a way. Captain of the ship and commander of the Spartan contingent sleeping with each other, that honestly can't last long before it blows up into everyone's face, let's be honest. It causes all kinds of complications â€" see: the captain of the UNSC's biggest battle ship ever built sneaking back into this particular part of the ship again and again and making a complete idiot out of himself â€" and it helps no one. She was right, she goddamn was.

Only he misses her. Has been missing her ever since she walked into his quarters four weeks ago to end it and walked out leaving him behind dazed and confused. He didn't even realize it at first, just wondered about the weird aching hollowness inside his chest while he

was overseeing drills and requesting replacement personnel and having his annual physical. Wondered why it grew bigger and bigger with the weeks of being stirred and "Aye, Captain"ed and being treated just like any random superior officer by his best friend. Realized he was missing her with painful intensity while he was in the middle of his daily treadmill run.

Ever since thenâ€| life onboard _Infinity_ seemed even more miserable for him than it did before he started sleeping with Sarah, despite facing continuous threats from all sides, despite tensions between Sarah and him, despiteâ€| despite _everything_.

Okay, this is getting him nowhere. Standing in front of her door yet again and hoping for a Christmas miracle is dumb and not what any of his mentors would ever let him get away with. Way he sees it, he either knocks now or never thinks of it againâ€| and before he could reconsider, his fist moved against the door, as if by its own, and he's even kind of glad about it. Saved him another ten minutes of agonizing over pining for her for the rest of his life or finally getting it over with.

For a moment, though, it looks as if all his theorizing and strategizing and agonizing just came to a really anticlimactic close because precisely _n_othing_ happens, and honestly, he _should_ have checked whether she's off her shift in the first place or not, even though that felt like stalkâ€| "Whatâ€| Tom?"

At least she didn't forget his first name. That's a good start, right? "I uhâ€| I was in the neighborhood and Iâ€| " am an idiot who can't even seem to find the right words to tell you how much he misses you, he nearly says but she stops him with shaking her head.

"You shouldn't be here." No, he probably shouldn't.

He didn't get into his position by always doing what he should and letting be what he shouldn't do. "I know." She just looks at him, eyebrows raised. He swallows. "Would you mindâ€| letting me in, Sarah?" Standing in front of his best friend'sâ€| lover'sâ€| door like a beggar. At Christmas. Feels great.

The only thing that feels even greater â€" and by that he means even more miserable â€" is that second she takes, looking at him with an inscrutable face, something that usually isn't her style. _Usually_, her face is expressive, and for someone like him as open as a tactics text book. He can't remember ever not having been able to read her. Shit, it's worse than heâ€| "Just a couple minutes, Tom."

Well, maybe a little _less_ worse than he thought. At least she's still talking to him. He nods and follows her invitation inside her quarters, stepping past her. He tries not to be too jealous of how spotless her quarters look and tries to concentrate on the lack of Christmas tinsel instead. Sarah's not a sentimental person but he knows her well enough to be aware of the absence of the little Christmas tree build from slightly discolored isolated wired she used to hang up in a corner of her bunk or quarters that fellow soldiers and subordinates couldn't see into. She never told him where it came from in the first place but it's always been there, on every ship or installation they served together, like a clockwork.

Maybe she put it where he can't see it, either. Ridiculous how that thought breaks his heart.

Alright, soâ€| he's pretty sure he had some sort of speech prepared in his head, had been working on it ever since she came into his quarters, gave him her "I can't do this anymore" piece and then promptly left, without giving him even the slightest chance to say his bit. And yet all he can come up with in this very moment is, "We have to stop doing this, Sarah."

She folds her arms in fronts of her chest and gives him frown. With that, at least, he can deal. "Stop doing what, Tom?"

Oh right, as if she doesn't know exactly what he means. Feeling weeks of frustration bubbling to the surface, he gestures around him. "This. All thatâ€| all those misunderstandings and fights and then standing in front of each others' quarters. That's bullshit, and we need to stop doing that."

That's pretty much not what he wanted to tell her. He's not quite sure what it was that he wanted to say but it sure as hell wasn't that. Sarah, on top of it all, now very much looks like she's having none of it. "Then why did you just do exactly that?"

Damn. That's a pretty good question. He hates it when she hits the mark dead center like that. "Because Iâ€| because you never even gave me a chance."

She looks at him with a frown, clearly not understanding what he wants to tell her. Really? She has no clue? Seriously? "A chance for what, Tom?" And then, something in her eyes and her posture changes and she very much looks like she does understand. Before he can wonder what it was that made her see, before he can wonder if it was something he did, something he telegraphed without being aware of it, she beats him to it. "Thisâ€| this is about what happened four weeks ago, isn't it?"

Superhumanly strong and smart. That's his girl. Or, actually, not. Which is kind of the entire problem. He nods. "Yes. Don't you think I deserve toâ€|"

"I did it for you, Tom." For him? She was breaking up with him for him? Now that's just ridiculous. So ridiculous, in fact, that she has no right to show so many signs of vulnerability beneath her usual hard Spartan veneer. She has no right to that flicker of pain in her eyes and that slight shaking of her hands. No right.

He knows, from hard won experience, that just for once he shouldn't let his disappointment and frustration rule his interactions with her but god_dammit, that break-up fucking hurt, and the shock of discovering that just now takes away the last of his carefully upheld commander's faÃ§ade. "For me? You came into my quarters to tell me that you "couldn't do that anymore" for me?"

"Tomâ€|" No, no more "Tom." No more excuses.

Time for some hard truths. "I'll tell you what you did that for. You did that for yourself, because for whatever reason you couldn't

bear to be even in the same room with me, and you have the audacity to tell me that you did that for me?"

"Yes, I did! For you, and for us!" Oh, right, for them. And now she's getting agitated, too. Just another thing she has no right to. Not she, not after everything. "Do you have any idea what would happen if the wrong upper echelon clowns found out that we were sleeping with each other? Do you?"

Aw, not that fraternization nonsense again. Technically, they're not in the same branch and not even in the same chain of command and honestly, they could have found some other way around that than breaking up? Besides, "You broke my fucking heart, Sarah!"

No.

Wait.

That wasn't on the agenda for today. It wasn't evenâ€œ it wasn't even something that he'd been aware of, right until the moment it slipped out. But it did, and now it's as if it's physically there, hanging in the room between them like an ominous cloud, making them stare at each other, chests heaving, neither of them understanding just what just happened.

It's Sarah who regains the ability to speak first, even if "Tom, Iâ€œ" is the only thing she's able to utter before shaking her head, as if she has to clear it.

Too shocked to even consider making an attempt at glossing it over, at reeling it back in before it can do some real damage, he can't help spitting out, "My heart, Sarah. That thing right here." He even goes as far as jabbing his index finger into the left side of his chest, hard, too far gone to care about avoiding theatrics. "You fucking broke it, and you didn't even give me a chance to say something!"

"I didn't mean to, goddammit!" Well that didn't keep it from happening now, did it? "We weren't even together, for God's sake! I didn't know it went deeper than just sex, and I didn't want to lose you just because I couldn't keep my hands off you. I didn'tâ€œ I didn'tâ€œ"

And now it hits him. This wasn't about non-frat regs. It was never about non-frat regs. It was about a whole lot of issues, but non-frat regs had no part in this. It was about things they never talked about, things they never mentioned in any conversationâ€œ things they'd only been thinking. Things Sarah, who walks into battle in nothing but scout armor when everyone else is wearing half a battle tank, who guards her heart with armor stronger than Infinity's hull plating, would never even allow herself to think.

Things Sarah is deathly afraid of. And he is, too, if he allowed himself just a tiny second of real, brutal honesty.

He can't help himself, even though he should know that closing in on a besieged Spartan only invites disaster. He still can't help himself and takes a step towards her, because some things are worse than a

Spartan feeling themselves under threat lashing out. Seeing Sarah Palmer slowly losing the desperate fight to keep all that armor around her heart intact, for example.

He steps closer, knowing full well that every step is a greater testament to stupidity, but then he's suddenly standing right in front of her, still alive, panting as if he just tried to keep up with her from here to the atrium and reaches out for her, to pull her down, her forehead against his, his hands cradling her head. He wants to kiss her so badly but there's something else he needs to do first.

"I care for you, Sarah." What he means is, of course, I love you, Sarah but he can't say that right now, maybe won't ever be able to say that. "I goddamn care for you. I've cared for you for a very long time. Do you really think I'd just give up that easily?"

He's not sure if he can feel her laugh or if that slight hitch he felt is the first and only sob he'll ever get from her. That doesn't matter, anyway, because what matters is that her forehead is still touching his and that he can feel her arms encircling his waist. "I wish you would, Tom," she says and he's pretty sure now that that hitch was a sob, "I wish you would."

No way, not now, not after everything, not after all those years. He wants to tell her so but as always, she beats him to it, moving to capture his mouth with hers and it's that kiss that makes him realize that she'd really broken up with him for herself. Just out of completely different reasons than he'd originally thought.

That kiss tells him very clearly that she'd broken up with him to protect herself from giving more than she was ready and able to give, giving more than was safe to give. Because right now, he can feel that she's giving all that she has, and that's something he hasn't ever felt before, in any of their past kisses.

It humbles him and it nearly overwhelms him; all the trust she's putting in him right now, giving him every possible way to sneak under her armor and crushing that heart she's so carefully been guarding until now and he nearly breaks the kiss to leave her quarters and never come back but all he does is break it and cradle her head in the crook of his neck, whispering to her, "I'm here, Sarah. Whatever happens, I'm here."

"I know," she tells him, engulfing him in the tightest, most careful hug he ever felt, "that's what I'm so afraid of."

The amazing thing is that to anyone else from her, from anyone else to him, it wouldn't make any sense, and he'd probably feel deeply insulted if it had been anyone else than Sarah who told him that. But it's coming from her and it makes all the sense in the universe. Strangely that, more than anything, tells him that coming here was the right thing after all. Even with all the hassle that's bound to follow up, all the ammunition they just gave Osman, all that extra time they'll now have to invest in watching their backs, it was right and it was worth it.

It's that thought that makes him tighten his hold on her, trying to tell her that he'll never let her go again and kiss her hair and smile and whisper, "Merry Christmas, Commander" into her hair, and

he's pretty sure he just heard her reply with a husky, "Happy Hanukkah, Captain," before she kisses his shoulder and lets her forehead rest there, as if she never wants to be anywhere else and it occurs to him that apparently even on a battle ships millions of lightyears away from home, once in a while, even a woodentop Navy captain and a Spartan commander are allowed a Christmas miracle, after all. And they goddamn deserve one so badly, don't they?

End
file.